

U.S. Rep. Steny H. Hoyer visited the Richard R. Clark Senior Center in La Plata Friday morning to help seniors wade through the new Medicare Part D prescription drug plan — which he said is more complicated than it needs to be.

Many seniors said the plan — which offers 47 different prescription drug plans from 19 insurance companies — is baffling. The premiums for the plans range from \$6 to \$67 a month.

“I spend a lot of money on medical insurance, and it covers prescriptions, but I have a lot of friends who don’t have coverage,” said Elizabeth Hall of Waldorf. “When you’re my age, you realize how expensive prescriptions are. When I write down how much it costs for drugs, it’s astronomical. I don’t know how anybody can afford it.”

Virginia Isabell Burnette, 83, said she wants to be able to handle the cost of prescription drugs so the cost does not fall back into the laps of her family.

“I don’t want to put a burden on my family,” she said. “My husband used to always talk about that.”

Some seniors attended Hoyer’s town hall event to better understand the Medicare Part D plan before they apply for benefits, including June Spear of Waldorf.

“I’m eligible, but I haven’t joined yet,” she said. “I’m checking out the different plans. I don’t have a lot of medical problems right now, but I’ve got to think of the future.”

“I want to know what’s going on with this,” said White Plains resident Dorothy Wallace, adding she receives Social Security benefits but is still working. “What I want to know is why this isn’t more user-friendly.”

Hoyer (D-Md., 5th) criticized the program during the meeting, saying it is unnecessarily complicated and failed to take care of the high cost of many medications by not allowing

administrators of the plan to negotiate pricing.

“I didn’t vote for this program,” the congressman said during the meeting. “I wanted an alternative program established within the Medicare program so it wasn’t so confusing. This program doesn’t adequately address the reduction of the high cost of medication. When you buy volume, you get a lower price. That’s what negotiation is all about.”

In addition, the Medicare Part D plan does not allow the importation of drugs from other countries such as Canada, which is often less costly, Hoyer said.

“Medicare is a pretty simple process, but this program is not so simple,” he said. Seniors need to do their homework to make sure that they select a prescription plan that will meet both present and future needs, he added.

The deadline to sign up for the Medicare Part D program is May 15, Hoyer said. If seniors have an adequate prescription plan already in place, he added, they don’t have to sign up for the program right away and will not be penalized later if they choose to select a plan under Medicare.

But seniors who do not have a prescription plan comparable to the Medicare Part D program and opt to not sign up for it by May 15 may be penalized later if they decide to enroll in the plan.

Hoyer suggested that seniors do a little ground work before signing up for the plan, including compiling a list of the prescription drugs they use so that they can pick a plan that covers the medication they need.

Seniors who are on a fixed income may be eligible for Medicare’s Extra Help program, Hoyer said.

To be eligible, a single senior's monthly income cannot exceed \$1,197, and the senior must have no more than \$11,500 in assets.

The monthly income of senior couples cannot exceed \$1,604 and they cannot hold more than \$23,000 in assets, Hoyer said.

The congressman warned seniors to not give important information, such as Social Security numbers, over the phone to anyone.

"Be careful and use common sense," he said. "There will be people who try to get information from you that you don't want to give out.

"This is a very, very important program," he added. "You need to know as much about it as possible. It's critical."

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